

AUTONOMOUS SPACES AND SOCIAL CENTERS

the politics of autonomous spaces and some
of the strategic questions they pose
by Paul Chatterton

Prepared by Organic Minds Collective

What are SOCIAL CENTERS?

- **Self-managed community spaces**
- **Buildings used for different non-profit activities**
- **A base for various social services like: cafes, public computer, library, free shops, space for travellers and activists**
- **Host meetings like: concerts, workshops, discussions, art performances and exhibits**

What are SOCIAL CENTERS?

- Also known as a free space, social centers may be designated "safe-space" where specific forms of dialogue and activism are encouraged and protected from harassment, or they may be intended to serve as open space for community interaction among widely disparate groups without censorship
- Independent, not for profit, politically plural spaces
- key organizing tool for political education within communities and movements

More about Social Centers

- **Social centers that are open to the general public are also part of the general third place movement in community building**
- **Third places which include small commercial or non-reclaimed urban spaces (or reclaimed from commercial activity towards cooperative use) such as community coffee houses may serve a similar function with or without an organizing focus besides localism**
- **Many permanent social centre collectives did emerge out of the strong UK squatter culture of the 1990s realizing that squatted spaces are short lived and can be an energy drain**

SC around the world:

- EUROPE
- UNITED KINGDOM
- USA
- JAPAN
- AFRICA
- PHILIPPINES
- INDONESIA
- MALAYSIA
- AUSTRALIA AND OTHER PARTS OF ASIA

Activities

- MEETINGS / GATHERING / PLANNING
- INTELLECTUAL AND POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS
- COOKING / FEEDING
- FILM NIGHTS
- DIY TEACHING
- ART AND MUSIC SESSIONS
- FREE SCHOOL
- GARDENING
- FREE SHOPS, etc.

Politics/principles

- ANTI-CAPITALIST
- ANARCHIST
- ANARCHO-COMMUNIST
- EGALITARIAN
- NON-HIERARCHAL / HORIZONTAL STRUCTURES
- ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN
- ANTI-PATRIARCHY
- CONSENSUS
- CREATIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE

Political Strategies

- they want to create political projects grounded in their communities
- they are comfortable with politics which was messy and impure
- they want to build strong relationships between people
- the way they organize them is experimental and promotes self management
- and they develop political strategies which attempt to break outside the activist ghetto.

Politics/principles

- **The whole point of the politics of the place is that they are open, complex and messy. This impure politics opens up debate so that conflicts and differences can be acknowledged and resolved.**

More about Social Centers

- **Social centers offer a steadiness, longevity, a sense of history and *‘something gentler to hold a position from’*. It’s this stability and openness together that can allow some really amazing and powerful politics to emerge.**
- **They are also about the hidden work of rebuilding social relationships around emotions, solidarity and trust; the invisible essential political work, that if ignored erodes the bedrock for affinity, understanding, tolerance and consensus.**

Self-management

- In effect, SC are a programme for expanding and making real self-management and a commitment to **direct democracy, consensus decision-making, direct participation and a rejection of hierarchical organisations, as well as various forms of discrimination.**
- **working out how to make decisions means that we also resolve problems and sharpen models for direct democracy**

Self-management

- **One of the trickiest issues faced by social centers is developing a collective understanding of what self-management actually means, and how to get people to take this on. This politics of self-management contrasts with the disempowerment and alienation of our lives at school, work and home.**

Experimental Organizing

- **Social centers are defined by their flexibility and pragmatism, choosing minimum formal legalities and, in parallel, developing their own forms of direct democracy**
- **Trial and error feature large as well as a willingness to accept mistakes and try new avenues when things don't work**

Decision Making Process

- **Consensus decision-making, a tool for promoting direct democracy between individuals based upon an equality of participation and the incorporation of many voices, is used almost universally as a tool for making decisions**
- **Decision-making structures are also highly inventive and flexible**

Why self-management:

- **Direct action**
- **Counter to paid labor and hierarchical structures**
- **Keep young people involved**
- **Working together and running a building collectively and independently is a political project of self education, where people learn how to work collectively, manage their lives, and come to realize that different ways of organizing social welfare and economic exchange do exist and are doable**

What are the challenges?

- **the tensions between consumers/service users and maintainers/carers**
- **gender divisions which are made worse when they are simply brushed under the carpet**
- **the tricky and unresolved issues around paid work**

What are the challenges?

- the lack of time that people can commit to projects
- the problems and limitations of informal self discipline and teaching others about collectively agreed rules, inclusivity and accessibility. - Inclusivity is key to the politics of self management as it both extends radical politics to newer groups but also sustains new energy and attracts new generations of people to manage and nourish the project

What are the challenges?

- so much work goes into running and cleaning SC and autonomous spaces that there is little time left for what is seen as the real stuff of activism - political meetings, demonstrations and actions, organizing, building social movements.
- Many activists, used to being mobile, are anxious about fixing themselves to a place too firmly. These fears - creating a self managed safe space that is too inward looking and comfortable – are important and need addressing, especially if social centres start to become trendy cafés, bars or alternative shops

More Political strategies

- **Rejection of fixed leadership and committees, in favor of more flexible, experimental and participatory strategic priorities to achieving radical social change**
 - *An important part of the debate is whether social centers are a means to a broader political end, or whether they are an end in themselves. Are they facilitators, containers or catalysts for political activity, or are they actually confrontational political strategies in themselves?*

Effectiveness as political projects?

- They make new worlds seem more achievable and increase the possibility of politics based on self-organizing and collectivity
- a crucial entry point for a largely depoliticized generation due to the lack of visible, active radical alternatives in their workplaces, schools and communities

Who do social centres aim at?

- On the one hand, they look inward – as resource centres and safe bases for those involved in developing and deepening anti-capitalist resistance and direct action
 - On the other hand, they look out beyond the comfort zone of known activists and like-minded politicians into the wider community, and connect and support local struggles
- Ultimately, these are not separate strategies and there needs to be a desire to build a broader base of support for anti-capitalist ideas and practices locality by locality.*

More strategies

- **people want to reach out through actions and deeds, through living examples that inspire people, rather than through the use of propaganda words and slogans**
- **people value the largely unknown views of the local community in their own right.**
- **try to avoid looking like ‘ghettoised anarchist squat spaces’, preferring to be professional looking, using familiar signs such as coffee machines, art exhibitions, and reading areas to be part of ‘normal society’.**

Other Possibilities

- **There is a need, and probably enough desire, for a stronger sense of a collectively functioning network that can mutually support the wider movement as well as individual projects**
- **Social centers could also state more forcefully what they are for and against and contribute to stating feasible alternatives locally. Many do this through, for example, workers co-operatives, not for profit entertainment, and free libraries and meeting spaces**

What needs to be done

- Growing these kinds of projects into a more connected, coherent and politically effective movement
- *Are they just defensively local projects or can, and should, they have wider meaning, and provide models for the benefit of our society?*
- What is their role in a wider parallel, externally oriented, growing infrastructure which meets our desires and needs right here and now, but which also genuinely represent non capitalist values?

Suggestions by Chatterton

- *Promote an ever-expanding set of activities that can start to genuinely create parallel opportunities for housing, leisure, work and food.*
- *Making a post-capitalist future begin that seems feasible exciting and doable and avoids the dogmatic, moralist politics of the Left*
- *Developing and sharing anti-capitalist ideas*
- *Having a long tradition of popular education*

Suggestions by Chatterton

- **consider whether, and how, they need to confront the local state as it becomes a block to further change, and the problems of just promoting their own version of local self management**
- **strategic issues of evaluation and collective methodology**
- ***Is it the content, the medium, the messengers, the process, the presentation?***

Weaknesses and blind spots

- **There are a number of key internal strategic issues such as, often invisible, internal hierarchies, lack of attention to accessibility, emotional needs and inclusivity, gender divisions and domination of men especially within group process, and age divisions especially those between different political cultures and movements**

Questions by Chatterton

- **The wider issue is how anti-capitalism can break out of the limits of the protective, internally looking ghettos it sometimes makes for itself. We have to ask ourselves, how can our examples appear more do-able and what we say more feasible?**
- **How can we use wider consultations and co-inquiry to develop a greater collective understanding of what we have achieved, and would like to achieve, and to engage with others about key issues?**

Disclaimer:

- This is a shortened version of an article that appeared in the booklet '*What's this place? Stories from social centres in the UK and Ireland*' available from <http://www.socialcentrestories.org.uk/>
- Paul Chatterton teaches and researches in the School of Geography at the University of Leeds where he runs the MA in Activism and Social Change (www.activismsocialchange.org.uk).
- His research on social centres is part of a research project called 'Autonomous Geographies' (<http://www.autonomousgeographies.org/>).
- He is also a member of the Trapeze Popular Education Collective and their resources can be downloaded @www.trapeze.org.